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ABSTRACT

In many Inupiat communities the traditional meeting house, the "qargi," was the first institution to vanish as churches and schools became the dominant forces of change. At present, the Inupiat elders have no responsibility for the formal education of the young Inupiat. The educational environment of each Inupiat community can be altered to make the Inupiat comfortable in teaching their young people the Inupiat way of life by the re-establishment of community centers devoted to the teaching of traditional skills and values to youth, in Inupiaq, by their parents and elders. The western school and Inupiat "qargi" need not be competitive institutions but should complement each other. Other community groups and institutions, including universities, can take part in the projects and programs developed. The revitalization of the "qargi" and traditional Inupiat instruction can contribute to the revitalization of the language, improvement of community participation, the development of Inupiat materials and teaching skills, and the strengthening of the community's cultural base. (Author/MSE)

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THE REVITALIZATION OF THE QARGI, THE TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY HOUSE, AS AN EDUCATIONAL UNIT OF THE INUPIAT COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

The educational environment of each Inupiat community can be altered to make the Inupiat comfortable in teaching their young people the skills and attitudes of the Inupiat way of life.

In many Inupiat communities the traditional meeting house, the "qargi", was the first institution to vanish as the churches and the schools became the dominant forces of change.

Presently, Inupiat elders do not have any responsibility for the formal educaton of the young Inupiat. A community center totally devoted to the teaching of Inupiat skills and values should be established so that the elders and the parents of the Inupiat youth would have the means of teaching their children what they know.

The Western "school" and the Inupiat "qargi" should not be competitive institutions; instead, they should complement each other. The language of instruction in the "qargi" will be Inupiaq, just as, in the "school" the language of instruction is English.

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In traditional Inupiaq communities the qargi served as the political, social, ceremonial, and educational institution. Amongst the coastal whaling Inupiaq communities, the qargi was an association of umialgit "whaling captains" and their crew members. Other family members, their wives and their children were not excluded from the qargi.

Each community had two or more qargit. Each qargi had a name and its own club house. Presently within the North Slope only two qargik exist. They are the Qaŋmaktuut and the Uŋasiksikaat in Tikiġaq (Point Hope, Alaska). Historically, there were three qargit in Utqiaġvik. They no longer exist.

Membership in a qargit provided a sense of belonging, an identity to an Inupiaq, especially to a man. One could say, Qaŋmaktuumiuguruŋa "I am a member of the club Qaŋmaktuut." Belonging to a qargi meant that he had attained the noblest profession of his society, a hunter.

There was a keen sense of competition and excellence amongst men in each of the qargit. This was especially evident during the competition games.

The coming of the missionaries marked the end of these qargit. Pagan rituals were held in the qargit; therefore, they, the qargit had to be destroyed. The churches assumed the function of meeting center and focus of social events, now associated with Christian holidays. The missionaries were so relentless in their task of eradicating pagan rituals and ways that some Inupiat of today cannot express joy through Inupiaq dancing and singing.

Western schools replaced the education received by the young men in the qargit. Educational content became irrelevant to the traditional Inupiaq way of life.

Inupiaq parents have for the most part been isolated from the western educational system. Traditional roles of parents as teachers of the Inupiaq way of life were severed when the schools claimed their children. Now these parents are the elders within our communities. Most of the men have spent their early adult years as subsistence hunters, depending upon the land and ocean for their survival. Some parents have taught their elder sons and daughters the skills which they know as hunters and preparers of killed game, but a large number of younger siblings within these families do not know these traditional skills.

During the 1983 Inuit Circumpolar Conference held in Frobisher Bay, Northwest Territories, Canada, the Inuit elders gave this message: "Do not forget the Inuit way of life. There is a great deal of knowledge and skills that the Inuit possess that should be included in the educational process. Do not forget the Inuit Language." The last sentence is

especially poignant because of the precarious stance of the Inupiaq language in Alaska. The Inupiaq language has suffered greatly in Alaska and the destruction is almost complete. The loss of the Inupiaq language by the Inupiat of Alaska will cut deeply.

There are programs in the schools to teach the language, but they are not enough. The indoctrination of the parents not to speak Inupiaq to their children has not been reversed. Active indoctrination has ceased, but the effect remains in an entire generation that accepted this nonsense as if it were truth. Perhaps more insidious, subtle forms of indoctrination remain. Abstract concepts and skills relating to the "modern" world are discussed only in English. Inupiaq is reduced to the status of a second or "foreign" language. The whole Inupiat community needs to speak Inupiaq if language revival and maintenance programs are to be effective. The children cannot learn to speak Inupiaq fluently without the help, understanding and cooperation of the entire Inupiat community.

What is needed for the survival of the Inupiaq language is also true for traditional Inupiat skills and customs. We must practice them if they are to be retained as a part of our lives and our heritage.

The Inuit Circumpolar Conference, through the adoption of Resolution 83-18, stated that "there is a need to integrate the traditional Inuit cultural values and the western cultural values within the educational system... that there is a need for more Inuit participation in developing and implementing educational delivery systems and policies... that our educational systems are to prepare our children for life based on values and skills from the Inuit culture and the western culture...".

The educational environment of each Inupiat community can be altered to make the Inupiat comfortable in teaching their young people the skills and attitudes of the Inupiat way of life. What is needed in each Inupiat community is an institution devoted to the teaching of Inupiat skills, stories, knowledge of the land and animals and consequently Inupiat values and behavior.

The concept of the qargi, the community house, should be revitalized. Traditionally the qargi was *the place where young men went to listen to and learn from the older men.* The women did not spend as much time in the qargi as the men did, but they were not totally excluded.

The physical layout of the modern day qargi can be as traditional or as modern as the Inupiat desire, as long as the people are comfortable in it. Depending on the size of the community, the qargi may be one room or a multi-room structure, but there should always be a large central room where Inupiat dances and competition games can be held. The

large central room can also be used to build boats and sleds or other large items. It may also be used for community feasts held during Thanksgiving and Christmas. As the qargi serves also as a community center, its educational function will be integrated into the life of the village.

Presently, the Inupiat elders do not have any responsibility for the formal education of the young Inupiat. If a community center totally devoted to the teaching of Inupiat skills and values was established the elders and the parents of the school children would then have the means of teaching their children what they know.

It can be possible for the Inupiaq child of today to be of both the Inupiat culture and the western culture. It is possible to establish in each community an educational system in which the students can learn skills which will enable them to function in both cultures. The students can learn to hunt, and to work in an office. They can learn to sew parkas and operate computers. They can learn to sing, drum and dance the Inupiat way and also enjoy the dances and songs of the western culture. They can learn to butcher a seal and make seal oil as well as bake a cake and marinate steaks. As was expressed in one of the position papers (author not known) for the 1980 Inuit Circumpolar Conference:

> "It is not necessary to return to the traditional way of life to benefit from the cultural heritage... some of the introduced customs and values *have* become part of a traditional pattern... I doubt that we will be able to return to the religion of our ancestors. But it is valuable to know the wisdom it expressed, and the importance it placed on deep respect for life, without which the culture of a hunting people would remain at a low level."

The elders in the Inupiat communities will be the "teachers" in the qargi. They know the land. They speak the language. They know how to make the tools necessary to hunt each kind of animal. They know how to prepare skins for clothing. They know the songs and the stories of the Inupiat.

A certified teacher who can speak Inupiaq can work side by side with the elders of each community. Together they can accomplish what needs to be done. The elder can give to the certified teacher the knowledge that he possesses and also the manner that he uses to "teach" the student.

In the course of one day the certified teacher can work with not just one knowledgeable Inupiaq, but several. Especially in the larger schools, such as in Kotzebue or Barrow, the class size will have to be reduced when the elder begins, for instance, to demonstrate how to choose and prepare wood for making a sealing harpoon. Several elders or knowledgeable Inupiat will be needed to teach several classes. The class size must be

small enough for the elder to have individual contact with each student, consistent with the traditional Inupiaq way of teaching.

Elders are individual in their expertise. There are those who are skilled in making ulus. Another may be expert in skinning foxes. Still another may enjoy sewing boots and other articles of clothing. We can expect that the elders will enjoy passing on the skills that they are justifiably proud of. There may be as many as ten or more Elder Teachers in a large qargi. The certified teacher should have several other young people helping as teacher aides. While the certified teacher has overall responsibility for several classrooms a teacher aide stays with an Elder Teacher during the time that it takes to finish a lesson or a project. In this way the knowledge that the elders possess will be given thoroughly to at least one individual who can then teach it to the others.

In the qargi the language of communication and instruction will be Inupiaq, just as, in the "school" the language of instruction and communication is English. Absolutely no English will be allowed in the qargi. If a student cannot speak Inupiaq then he should remain silent until he has learned to ask questions in Inupiaq. Students who can understand but are not able to speak Inupiaq should be able to take a conversational class in "school". The conversational class should reflect, as much as possible, what is needed to participate in a qargi project that they are currently taking. The student in the qargi will be evaluated on his oral and physical performance or on the finished product. Inupiaq literacy (reading and writing) and grammar will be taught in the "school", not in the qargi. All of the instruction in the qargi will be by demonstration, in the traditional way.

Education received in the qargi will be in conjunction with the education that is received in the "school". Before coming to the qargi to participate in a project with Inupiat Elders, each student must complete a preparatory class in the "school". For example if the qargi project is to make a whaling harpoon, the students should read about whaling, listen to knowledgeable Inupiat talk about the making of whaling harpoons, and also "learn" the Inupiaq names (vocabulary lists) of the different tools and materials that they will be using in the qargi to make their own whaling harpoons. They may even watch a videotape of someone making whaling harpoons. The preparatory class in the "school" should enable the students to receive maximum input from their sessions with the Inupiat Elders.

The students can also write compositions for the "school" based on what they have learned or done in the qargi. They can put to practical use the skills that they have learned in

mathematics in "school" as they build a sled or boat in the qargi. The students can use the Inupiaq language writing skills which they have learned in the "school" as they label items that they are using in the qargi. In time there may even be an Inupiaq composition class in the "school", and an Inupiaq oral tradition class in the qargi. The students will learn to write or tell stories in Inupiaq, eventually.

The qargi teaching schedule should not be restricted to a time which coincides with the "school" teaching schedule. The "school" and the qargi should not be competitive institutions; instead, they should complement each other. The qargi should open in the afternoon and extend into the evening hours. This scheduling will allow parents who are willing to volunteer their time in the evenings to participate. It would be ideal if a mother who is willing to teach preparation of Inupiat foods can teach during the dinner hours and also bring her family to partake of the meal. The qargi can announce that during a certain week the preparation of a certain dish will be taught, and women who want to teach young girls can volunteer their time for a certain night. There are many young men and women who are no longer in the "schools" who can learn from the Elder teachers during the evening hours when they are not at work. It can be a time of communication and learning. There are young men in the villages who need to learn how to make whaling harpoons, and there are young women who need to learn how to make parkas. Since there are many young parents who do not have the knowledge possessed by the elders, there may be children and parents taking the same instruction. This is good because parent and child will be working and studying together to learn and maintain Inupiat ways and values.

What are the skills that the Inupiat youth will be learning from the Elder Teachers and their parents? In one school the name of the program is Survival Skills. This is an appropriate name because under it many facets of Inupiat knowledge can be discussed. Here are but a few of the topics which the qargi can offer:

1. preparation of game animals for food and clothing.
2. how to make boots, parkas, mittens and other articles of Inupiaq clothing;
3. how to make hunting weapons such as harpoons, spears, hooks, snares, etc....
4. how to set traps or nets for various game;
5. knowledge of land and ocean for young hunters; how to interpret the weather signs;
6. traditional Inupiat skill and endurance games;
7. Inupiat dances and songs.

There are numerous other topics which can be included in the curricula of the qargi.

The interests of the Inupiat-oriented institutions, e.g. Eskimo Whaling Commission, Taġiuġmiut Aġnat Organization, Qitiktitchirit, Senior Citizens Center, North Slope Borough Commission on History, Language and Culture, the North Slope Borough School District, North Slope Borough Post Secondary Learning Center, and the various dance groups, within the community should be reflected in the activities of the qargi. For instance, the Inupiat food preparation classes taught in the qargi can cook large quantities of Inupiat food, caught by hunters and sold to the qargi, and feed the Inupiat Elders supper every day. The qargi can serve as a lounging/discussion place for the elders. Maybe the various dance groups can come to the qargi to practice new songs and dance routines in the evenings while the classes are in session. It would be great to work on a class project while listening to live Inupiat music and much laughter. Any meetings held in the qargi must be in Inupiaq.

The qargi should be open all year long. Hunting classes must be included in the curricula of the qargi-school cooperation. Each high school student should participate in at least one hunting/camping expedition. Preparatory classes must be taken prior to each expedition.

University courses can be joint projects with the qargi. Practical course content in Inupiat dancing, art, sports, food preparation, folk medicine and practices, etc. will be given in the qargi. Preparatory classes prior to attending a session in the qargi will be taken in the University Learning Center.

It is hoped that with the implementation of such a program, issues such as lack of community participation, lack of Inupiat teachers, lack of Inupiat teaching materials and therefore lack of local Inupiat control of the educational system can be resolved. It is my firm belief that students who develop confidence in their ability to learn traditional skills and values in the qargi will then go on to become better students in the western style "school".

Finally, it is hoped that the revitalization of the qargi as the champion of all that is Inupiat will lead to the revitalization of the Inupiaq language and also strengthen the cultural base of each community. It is hoped that as each Inupiaq elder or adult learns to use Inupiaq, again, as the language of communication and instruction with the youth in the qargi, that this new habit will spill over into the other activities of the community.